



The Cost of Living Crisis

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Introduction

- Three day per week Welfare Benefits Paralegal, two days per week Housing Paralegal
- There is an inextricable link between Housing and Welfare Benefits, including possession proceedings and homelessness resulting directly from benefit problems:
 - Case Study: A secure tenant who was a single father of young children had a possession order made against him for rent arrears of less than £2000. He had numerous Housing Benefit issues that he wasn't assisted with and only approached our services once a section 184 decision found him intentionally homeless. Unfortunately, the LHA upheld their decision upon review and there were no merits to pursue a section 204 review in the County Court.



Cost of Living Project

Two avenues of funding:

- National Lottery Communities Fund – just under £500k over three years
- London Legal Support Trust/GLA - £150k over one year – Cost of Living Project



Cost of Living Project

Crisis Navigators:

- Available for those with rent, mortgage or service charge arrears in the boroughs we work in (Croydon, Wandsworth, Kingston, Merton)
- Utilities Arrears

Debt Advice:

- DFL contract – team of regulated debt advisors

Community Engagement

- Connecting with other organisations, opening up referral routes, setting up outreach

Volunteer services – recruiting volunteers to support the project



Type of work we do

Cost of Living Project:

- Discretionary Housing Payments
- Benefit Checks / Grant Searches
- Issuing foodbank vouchers
- Assisting with Council Tax Discretionary Reductions
- Referral system to our Housing, Debt and Immigration teams
- Outreach sessions alongside the CAB, Mind, MP Sarah Jones (for Central Croydon), and Croydon Healthy Homes → another avenue to take on clients



Practicalities

Type of clients:

- We have started this project in September, still too early to measure a repeat demographic
- Households who are on low incomes
- Vulnerable people with health problems

Repeat problems

- Not enough money to pay bills
- Unable to differentiate between priority and non-priority debts
- Unable to claim what they may be entitled to: e.g., help with Water and Energy

Our response

- Taking on as many clients as possible, supported calls, apply for benefits, challenge UC/PIP refusals for higher elements, Valuation Tribunal work



Ongoing trends

Pre-pandemic

- Difficulties in getting Legal Aid funding for cases since LASPO 2013
 - Vulnerable people falling through the gaps with no access to justice due to strict eligibility rules: disposable income cannot exceed £733
- County Court Duty Scheme – all Defendants are represented regardless of income
 - Court Orders reflect issues with Housing Benefit and UC, adjournments are granted to enable income maximisations
i.e., Discretionary Housing Payments for benefit caps, applying for Welfare Benefits, sorting out HB backdated payments

People are not getting what they are entitled to – benefit system made complicated



Although the Ministry of Justice (“MoJ”) are trying to improve access to Legal Aid, Professor Donald Hirsch at Loughborough University claims that planned improvements will “*vanish in a few years*” unless thresholds are linked to inflation.

Former Law Society president Stephanie Boyce explains:

“The MoJ proposes using 2019 expenditure benchmarks through to 2026, but with the cost-of-living crisis these are already out of date and prices are expected to have risen by a breath-taking 20 per cent by 2026,”

“Progressively more people would be left unable to seek justice if this is not addressed.”



Ongoing trends

Post-pandemic reality

- Breathing Space for those suffering from Debts
 - *The Debt Respite Scheme (Breathing Space Moratorium and Mental Health Crisis Moratorium) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020*
- Whilst all households are affected by the cost of living crisis, it disproportionately affects households with low incomes
- Change of circumstances – e.g., people who could previously pay off their Current Monthly Instalment on their mortgages, are struggling to keep their homes
- More people are losing their homes as a direct result of pandemic related issues like having been furloughed, losing their businesses, suffering from long Covid, personal circumstances etc



How to refer to us

Clients who need crisis navigation – send details to crisis@swllc.org

Clients who need welfare benefits advice – send details to benefits@swllc.org

General enquiries – send details to enquiries@swllc.org

Online triage form (fastest responses to case enquiries) – <https://swllc.org/contact-us/>

